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Author(s): EUGENE HOLLAHAN

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RUNNING IN CIRCLES: A MAJOR MOTIF IN *LORD OF THE FLIES*

EUGENE HOLLAHAN

WHETHER *LORD OF THE FLIES* is gratifyingly artificial or annoyingly artificial, there seems to be little doubt that one of the author's main devices for elaborating his patterned tale is the figure of the circle. Critics, though occasionally noticing the presence of a random circle image or pattern, have ignored the structural and thematic significance of the circle in Golding's book.¹ Even so, his imaginative power, highly visual in content, communicates itself in this novel to a large extent by a repeated use of circle images, circle patterns, and circle symbols. Texturally, the novel is thick with circle figures of many kinds and with phrases that reinforce the more explicit figures. Words like *circle*, *semi-circle*, *circular*, *circuit*, *encircled*, *cirque*, and the semantically-related word *ring* occur forty-two times. These words are linked in scattered and various contexts with many aspects of the setting, characters, episodes, conflicts, mood, and atmosphere, as well as with major aspects of structure and theme. As Golding employs it in *Lord of the Flies*, the circle provides stunning visual effects as well as ironic and symbolic commentary on the diverse elements of the narrative.²

Visually, setting is presented in vivid scenes which depend in part upon circular images and formations. For example, the coral reef around the island is an "irregular arc" (p. 14). When the boys peer at the blank surrounding ocean, the "taut blue horizon encircled them, broken only by the mountain top" (p. 132). Sunlight streams through foliage to form "circular spots" (p. 225). A dramatic, idyllic scene, when Ralph, Jack, and Simon near the top of the mountain from where they can view the entire island, is set "on the lip of a cirque, or a half-cirque, in the side of the mountain." Also, from the top of the mountain they see the "circular horizon of water" (p. 37). An impressive scene by the mountain top fireside marks the moment when Sam and Eric first see the "beast," in reality the dead parachutist: "The flames were mastering the branches, the bark was curling and falling away, the wood exploding. The tent fell inwards and flung a wide circle of light over the mountain top" (p. 121).

At another moment, the ever-burning “disc of the sun” seems to participate in the changes being wrought in the human community below (p. 163). Repeatedly, vivid scenes like the pig-killings occur in round-shaped clearings in the forest. After one such killing, the scene concludes with the ironic observation by the narrator that, by contrast with the massacre of the pig, “butterflies still danced, preoccupied in the centre of the clearing” (p. 168). More broadly, when Simon’s body is carried to sea, the narrator imagines that “over the darkened curve of the world the sun and moon were pulling; and the film of water on the earth planet was held, bulging slightly on one side while the solid core turned” (p. 190). In many ways, then, the reader is made to experience and remember the setting of Golding’s fable in various round images.

The mounted pig’s-head, the insect-ridden Lord of the Flies, is twice referred to as assuming, in the heated imagination of the epileptic Simon, a circular shape. This transformation occurs effectively in one of the imaginative climaxes of the story, when Simon is experiencing a quasi-mystical hallucination: “Simon’s head wobbled. His eyes were half-closed as though he were imitating the obscene thing on the stick. He knew that one of his times was coming on. The Lord of the Flies was expanding like a balloon” (p. 178). Also during this climactic colloquy with the head, when Simon realizes that the beast is within the boys themselves rather than outside in some non-human creature, he faints and revives, after which he perceives the head differently, as having lost some of its fearfulness, but nevertheless as ghastly.

With the running of the blood Simon’s fit passed into the weariness of sleep. He lay in the mat of creepers while the evening advanced and the cannon continued to play. At last he woke and saw dimly the dark earth close by his cheek. Still he did not move but lay there, his face sideways on the earth, his eyes looking dully before him. Then he turned over, drew his feet under him and laid hold of the creepers to pull himself up. When the creepers shook the flies exploded from the guts with a vicious note and clamped back on again. Simon got to his feet. The light was unearthly. The Lord of the Flies hung on his stick like a black ball (pp. 179-80).

In Simon’s heated consciousness, the feared beast, representing an ultimate fearful truth, and the image of the circle, fuse vividly.

Circle images are associated appropriately with the other major characters, Ralph, Jack, Piggy, and Roger. Ralph’s circular belt carries a motif of evil by reason of its “snake-clasp.” Moreover, in reveries of life at home in Wiltshire, he thinks of the bus center with its lamps and wheels, suddenly going back in memory and “dancing round a lamp standard” (p. 203). Finally, when he is being chased by the hunters at the

close of the story, "Spots jumped before his eyes and turned into red circles that expanded quickly till they passed out of sight" (p. 245). Jack appears initially, in command of his troop of choir boys, confronting Ralph on the beach; melodramatically, his movements diabolically reflect his fiery temper, augmenting the impression made by his red hair: "The boy came close and peered down at Ralph, screwing up his face as he did so. What he saw of the fair-haired boy with the creamy shell on his knees did not seem to satisfy him. He turned quickly, his black cloak circling" (p. 27). Again, when he asserts himself after the first pig-killing and forces the boys to eat, he is pictured as the "centre of a bewildered circle of boys" (p. 93). When he is first seen after he and Ralph and Simon have first been frightened upon seeing the mysterious dead parachutist, he is "kneeling and drawing a circular pattern in the sand with his forefinger" (p. 154).³ In the course of the story, he becomes, as it were, the center of a circle as he becomes the leader of the hunters and his name takes on a superstitious significance for the boys: "'Jack.' A taboo was evolving round that word too" (p. 173). Also, when he attacks Ralph, he "struck in a humming circle behind him and Ralph only just parried the blow" (p. 220). Piggy is, of course, permanently identified with and identifiable by his spectacles; in addition, twice he is linked with another kind of circle, as "the boys were a closed circuit of sympathy with Piggy outside" (p. 29) and "Piggy once more was the centre of social derision so that everyone felt cheerful and normal" (p. 184). Roger is once pictured playing a harmless though significant game with the younger boy Henry, throwing stones near but not at the child, in a scene suggesting the psychological profundity of the circle as cultural symbol.

The stone, that token of perposterous time, bounced five yards to Henry's right and fell in the water. Roger gathered a handful of stones and began to throw them. Yet there was a space round Henry, perhaps six yards in diameter, into which he dare not throw. Here, invisible yet strong, was the taboo of the old life. Round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law. Roger's arm was conditioned by a civilization that knew nothing of him and was in ruins (p. 78).

By and large, the circle is a regular means of linking the characters with each other and with serious motifs and a structural pattern, as well as with such artifacts as spectacles, a sundial, bus wheels, and a billowing parachute.

Not only individual characters but also the entire group of boys are presented in scenes that draw upon circular figure and arrangement. When they first assemble, they seem automatically to group themselves

in a circle in order to deliberate and vote (p. 30). Many scenes in the first half of the book present variations on the idea of the “circle of boys” that turn their “ring of faces” to Ralph, their first elected leader. Whenever the discussion is in progress, regardless of who holds the symbolic conch-shell, reference is always made to the circular group which, by its pattern, affirms democracy, rule, and order.⁴ A variation of the rational circle, but one which verges toward the irrational circle that typifies the latter half of the story, is the pig-hunting circle formed to procure food and also to alleviate the boys’ itch for adventure. Excitedly, Jack and the others tell Ralph about their first kill: “Look! We’ve killed a pig—we stole up on them—we got in a circle—” (p. 86). Around the hunters’ campfire, they “became a circle of boys” which for the moment includes all of the boys, even Piggy and Ralph who would later be excluded because of their reluctance to give up completely a civilized way of life for a tribal existence. When the group reenacts the kill, “Maurice pretended to be the pig and ran squealing into the centre, and the hunters, circling still, pretended to beat him. As they danced, they sang” (p. 94). When Sam and Eric recount their confrontation with the beast, Ralph notices that the excited “circle of boys before him bristled with hunting spears” (p. 124). Under the pressure of this fearful new inducement either to retreat or to action, the group shifts its positions. From Sam and Eric’s bleeding faces, “the circle of boys shrank away in horror. Johnny, yawning still, burst into noisy tears and was slapped by Bill till he choked on them. The bright morning was full of threats and the circle began to change. It faced out, rather than in, and the spears of sharpened wood were like a fence. Jack called them back to the centre” (p. 125). Another circle of boys pretending to kill a human being forms when they elatedly surround Robert during one of their games: “The circle moved in and round. Robert squealed in mock terror, then in real pain” (p. 141). When this mock ritual becomes almost real, and the “chant rose ritually, as at the last moment of a dance or hunt,” the boys swarm upon the fallen Robert, unconsciously foreshadowing their later treatment of Simon. “Jack’s arm came down; the heaving circle cheered and made pig-dying noises. Then they lay quiet, panting, listening to Robert’s frightened snivels. He wiped his face with a dirty arm and made an effort to retrieve his status” (p. 142). This still somewhat civilized circle also rejects Simon’s realistic advice to climb the mountain and solve the mystery of the beast; at Simon’s hint, the “circle shivered with dread” (p. 159).

At the climax of the story, the killing of Simon, the circle motif is most obviously stressed by means of several repetitions and variations in a relatively short passage. As the scene opens, Roger is pretending to be the pig, and the other big boys pretend to hunt him, first surrounding him: “a circling movement developed and a chant” (p. 187). The “littl-

uns” run about excitedly outside the circle, and even Ralph and Piggy “found themselves eager to take a place in this demented but partly secure society,” seeing from their outside position the “brown backs of the fence that hemmed in the terror and made it governable” (p. 188). As the excitement mounts, the “littluns” start a ring of their own, so that the entire party is involved, as “the complementary circles went round and round as though repetition would achieve safety of itself.” Lightning flashing above, when Simon stumbles out of the forest with the message that the beast is merely a dead parachutist, the hysterical boys fall on him and destroy him: “the mouth of the circle crunched and screamed.” The presence in this climactic passage of the various circle images and transformations of earlier circle figures imaginatively intensifies the function of the figure in Golding’s intellectual scheme. Certainly, one distinct impression that the reader carries away from this scene is the dynamic permutation of Golding’s circle thus far in the narrative.⁵

After this climax, several other scenes involving the group involve the circle pattern. After Jack has led away most of the boys to Castle Rock, they recline about the place “in a semicircle” and respond uniformly to Jack’s directions and warnings to guard against the beast: “The semicircle shuddered and muttered in agreement” (p. 197). In their actions, the newly-formed tribe of hunters express the primitive mental processes that now dominate them and that impel them now into circular tribal patterns. When three of them have stolen Piggy’s glasses, dashing back to Castle Rock, impulsively “they turned cartwheels down by the moving streak of phosphorescence” (p. 207). By contrast, as Piggy and Ralph sadly contemplate their desertion by the other boys, Piggy examines the former site of the original discussion circle: “The shape of the old assembly, trodden in the grass, listened to him” (p. 211). When Ralph lies hidden listening to the sounds coming from Castle Rock, he wistfully imagines how the group of boys would be situated: “The tribe was dancing. Somewhere on the other side of this rocky wall there would be a dark circle, a glowing fire, and meat. They would be savouring food and the comfort of safety” (p. 229). In the closing scene, when the ship’s officer rescues Ralph from his pursuers, Ralph becomes aware that he is surrounded by a “semicircle of little boys, their bodies streaked with coloured clay, sharp sticks in their hands” (p. 246). In general, it seems that whenever the author’s characters group together, they are likely to form in circular arrangements.

As the foregoing analysis indicates, Golding’s novel is arranged around the concept of two important kinds of circles, the first being the socio-political circle where the assembled boys engage in rational discussion in order to plan their way out of their difficulties, and the second being the tribal circle where the regressive boys dance ritually and kill savagely. On the whole, the first of the two great circles appears in the

first half of the novel and the other in the second half. Conveniently, one might refer to these two group patterns as circle and anti-circle, although the terms might be only rhetorical and not essential. The social or civilized circle is established when the boys decide to conduct themselves along lines decreed by rational, democratic principles. When Ralph is elected leader, the "circle of boys broke into applause." The model they follow might be Parliament or any similar institution. Thereafter, whenever they meet upon the platform of pink granite thrusting out upon the beach from the forest, they automatically take their positions in a circle. Key episodes are thus highlighted by the circle form. For example, when the boy with the colored birthmark declares that he had seen a "beastie," Ralph asserts rather hesitantly that the child must have been dreaming. Then, "Laughing, Ralph looked for confirmation round the ring of faces. The older boys agreed; but here and there among the little ones was the dubiety that required more than rational assurance" (p. 47). Later, as they engage in such communal actions as the feasting which follows the first successful pig-hunt, they inevitably group themselves in a circle: "They became a circle of boys round a camp fire and even Piggy and Ralph were half-drawn in" (p. 92). Even so, in keeping with the theme of the disintegration of human society under certain extreme conditions, the social circle is subject to intense disruptive pressures. One such instance, already cited, is when Sam and Eric describe the "beast." This rational circle, which characterizes the first half of this very symmetrical novel, begins to disintegrate at the halfway point of the story with the appearance of Golding's essential configuration, the "breaking up of sanity" announced obliquely by Ralph (p. 110).

The tribal circle, or anti-circle, forms as a kind of reflex action from the disintegration of the more civilized circle on the platform. It is identified ultimately, of course, with another part of the island setting, Castle Rock. A foreshadowing of the violence and chanting linked with this circle occurs when the hunters excitedly relive their first kill. They describe how they had formed a circle, how they closed in on the pig, and then, when Maurice enters the ring pretending to be the victim: "Then Maurice pretended to be the pig and ran squealing into the centre, and the hunters, circling still, pretended to beat him. As they danced they sang" (p. 94). This innocent mimicry is later to become reality when the boys, having cast off Ralph's democratic common sense and Piggy's rationalism, revert to a primitive condition. Even so, at least once again the boys play, though less innocently this time, at the circular mock pig-killing game. Surrounding Robert, shouting "Make a ring," they imitate their hunting technique (p. 142). Most vividly, the primitive circle appears in the climactic scene when the hysterical boys kill Simon. Again they are playing their game, with this time Roger as the pig, but when Simon crawls into their instinctually-patterned dance, they cease merely play-

ing and automatically destroy him. The circle is now clearly the tribe's manner of organizing itself, as we later see that working, dancing, or resting they encircle some mysteriously-important center point. The circle of civilized boys has become a circle of compulsive savages.

Both plot structure and thematic structure are linked with and even dependent upon the fundamental circular pattern. Viewed one way, the plot can be seen as the disintegration of the rational circle and the formation of the irrational primitive circle, the two circles being typified respectively by discussion and dance. In a structural analysis of the plot, the representative event would be the first occasion when the boys impulsively follow Jack away from the assembly. "The space under the palm trees was full of noise and movement. Ralph was on his feet too, shouting for quiet, but no one heard him. All at once the crowd swayed towards the island and were gone—following Jack. Even the tiny children went and did their best among the leaves and broken branches. Ralph was left, holding the conch, with no one but Piggy" (p. 49). This is the first stage in the dissolution of the circle. Structurally, the defining event would be the second occasion when the discussion circle dissolves under the pressure of internal stress. Jack becomes hysterical and stirs up the boys. "He gave a wild whoop and leapt down to the pale sand. At once the platform was full of noise and excitement, scramblings, screams, and laughter. The assembly shredded away and became a discursive and random scatter from the palms to the water and away along the beach, beyond nightsight. Ralph found his cheek touching the conch and took it from Piggy" (p. 114). Predictably, the crisis is the moment when Jack, finally disgusted with Ralph's sensibleness and with the rational circle's futile efforts to devise a meaningful way of life, at last deserts the society, and says, "I am going off by myself" (p. 158). Of course, this action of Jack's draws the majority of boys after him, and in effect he has destroyed the orderly society. The culminating event, which logically must show the new circle or anti-circle forming, might be the climax, when the dancing boys kill Simon, or it might be any other of several instances in the latter part of the story when they are shown grouping together for a feast, dance, or pow-wow. In any case, structurally, both plot and theme are circular in that they depend upon Golding's unifying image of the circle for their symmetry and balance.

Depending as it does to a high degree upon the circle motif for much of its unity and coherence, *Lord of the Flies* is highly wrought, even artificial in an almost negative sense, but the artifice of the circle is more than matched by the intellectual, emotional, and imaginative content of the story. For one thing, the circle images are evenly distributed throughout the narrative, never dominating the action though subtly reinforcing action and character as well as conveying by implication many of Golding's significant minor themes. Formally, the reader experiences

the novel as a pairing of two symmetrical halves, Ralph's circle and Jack's circle, that dramatize the transformation or reversion which is the author's main concern. The pairing of the two dominant circles finds reinforcement in such diverse images as the narrator's description of Ralph and Jack early in the book as "two continents of experience and feeling, unable to communicate" (p. 70), and, later, his account of a second confrontation between the two leaders, when Jack insists that they must hunt meat: "Jack stood up as he said this, the bloodied knife in his hand. The two boys faced each other. There was the brilliant world of hunting, fierce exhilaration, skill; and there was the world of longing and baffled commonsense" (p. 89). The association of the circle with rational aspirations and also with primitive mental processes is effective even though these ideas might be forceful enough without the presence of the circle image. In general, although the many circles are not obtrusive in an ordinary reading, they help the reader to see the story and to understand it, just as they might well have helped the author to envision and organize the story.

In summary, it seems hardly possible to overestimate the importance of the circle to Golding's purpose in *Lord of the Flies*. Artistically, it is perhaps the most significant motif; at least, it is a major one. As a recurrent motif, in its varied appearances, it carries with it many concepts of importance in the orchestration of Golding's complex theme. For example, as has been shown, in terms of the setting, the circle suggests both isolation and containment. In terms of several artifacts, it suggests rationalism and scientific progress as well as regression. With the characters, it is instrumental in showing extreme emotional states, defense mechanisms, persecutions, and taboos. As shown in relation to the entire group of boys, it suggests reason, order, civilization, integrity, while also showing change and disintegration. Violence and killing as manifested in tribal communal action are also represented by the circle. As Golding employs it, the circle represents both a rational arrangement and a primitive configuration. It is his main device for showing the shape of the two societies, or, put it another way, the two radical forms taken by the society on the island. The frequently-recurring circle images serve to remind the reader of the presence and importance of the two more important human circles, and the human configurations provide oblique commentary on the story in that they suggest that rational society and primitive tribe are in one sense fundamentally the same. In fact, the chief irony of the book, that Ralph's way and Jack's way take similar form, is conveyed by the circle image and motif.

GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

NOTES

- 1 The main developments in the criticism of this novel are indicated in William Golding, *Lord of the Flies: Casebook Edition, Text, Notes, and Criticism*, ed. James R. Baker and Arthur P. Ziegler, Jr. (New York, 1964). More recently, in Jack Biles, "Piggy: *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 1 (October 1968), 83-109, Golding's method of characterization is examined intensively, and the conclusion is reached that "by virtue of the number and diversity of his qualities, Piggy is the best characterization in *Lord of the Flies*" (p. 104). Page references in the present essay are to William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, ed. E. L. Epstein (New York, 1959).
- 2 Golding does not press any symbolic meaning of the circle too strenuously upon the reader; however, he seems to be aware of many of the traditional uses and symbolic meanings of the circle. Several of these meanings are particularly relevant to Golding's theme of the disintegration and reversion of an orderly human society. Traditionally, the circle may represent divinity, eternity, sanctity, completeness, the self, the One, and many other religious and philosophical concepts. The circle, of course, is a fundamental symbol in primitive cultures, being one of the primary archetypes. See, for example, Carl G. Jung, ed., *Man and His Symbols* (New York, 1964), pp. 240-49. Also, see Bruno Munari, *The Discovery of the Circle* (New York, n.d.).
- 3 The discovery of the beast has the greatest effect on Jack, whose regression to savage violence under the pressure of intense fear gives the second half of the novel its content and form. At this point, in compulsively drawing a circle in the sand, he seems to be resisting the threat of dissolution by striving automatically to preserve his sense of a complete, civilized self. On this psychological phenomenon, see M. L. von Franz, "The Process of Individuation," in Jung, *Man and His Symbols*: "As in effect a protection against shocks, a child may dream or draw a circular motif that symbolizes the all-important center of the psyche" (p. 165). Golding seems to imply that some such defense mechanism is here made use of briefly and unsuccessfully by Jack, although no more profound "Jungian" parallel need be insisted upon.
- 4 Golding was probably not unaware that the conch-shell, taken by some readers to be the chief symbol of the novel, has religious connotations in Buddhism; it represents Buddha's voice, being blown during church services to call the faithful to church. See *The World's Great Religions*, ed. Sam Welles (New York, 1957), p. 69. In Golding's book, it is one way of achieving a depth or resonance of suggestibility that adds to the overall imaginative effect.
- 5 Golding's description of the dancing circle as going "round and round as though repetition would achieve safety of itself" strikes a note characteristic of primitive circular patterns. On this subject, Bruno Munari says: "Dancing in a circle, stamping in rhythm, no one is first, no one is last—all are equal and all stamp alike. The dance begins slowly, then rhythm takes hold and a sense of infinity arises from this human ring which turns round and round with its rhythmic beat" (p. 28). In *Lord of the Flies*, the boys join the discussion circle in order to think and act rationally, submerging their identities for the common good; on the other hand, they join the primitive circle apparently in order to escape responsibility and restraint by hiding, as it were, behind a mask in the common circle.